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The Golden Harpsichord of Michele Todini (1616–1690)

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Michele Todini, Italian instrument maker and inventor, was born in Piedmont and in about 1636 moved to Rome, where he was keeper of the instruments of the Congregazione di Santa Cecilia. He was a trombone player and organist with the Musici del Campidoglio, then its *decano* (dean or senior musician), and also performed professionally on various bowed instruments. Designer and maker of many types of musical instruments, he is best known for constructing the complex musical mechanisms that he displayed in his Galleria Armonica e Matematica in Rome, one of the first museums of musical instruments. One of these machines was the instrument now known as the Metropolitan Museum's Golden Harpsichord, a large, intricately carved instrument flanked by near-lifesize figures of Polyphemus and Galatea, all made of gilded wood (89.4.2929).

According to the *Dichiaratione della Galleria armonica* (Rome, 1676), his book describing the Galleria and its contents, Todini began work on the museum in 1650. The Galleria displayed four machines of Todini's design. Two elaborate clocks enclosed in sculptures were the "mathematical" exhibits. One of the two "harmonic" attractions, the "Greater Machine," was a collection of seven instruments—

harpsichord, various spinets, organ, violin, and lyra viol—that could be controlled in any combination from a single keyboard. This contraption is rather fancifully illustrated both in Athanasius Kircher's *Phonurgia nova* (Kempten, 1673) and as no. XXXIII in Filippo Buonanni's *Gabinetto armomico* (Rome, 1722).

Todini called the Galleria's other "harmonic" attraction "La Macchina di Polifemo e Galatea." In chapter 3 of the *Dichiaratione*, he describes the instrument as follows: "In the second room [of the Galleria] is represented the story of Polyphemus with a number of statues covered in gold, and among the others is Galatea, who is shown passing through the sea carried by two dolphins harnessed by a cupid seated on a seashell, with sea nymphs paying court, and served by large, lifesize tritons who carry a harpsichord, the case of which is rich with carvings representing, in bas-relief covered with gold, the triumph of the above mentioned Galatea with a marine procession that offers up in tribute diverse fruits of the sea. Polyphemus is seated on the slope of a mountain in which he lived, as the story relates, in the act of playing a sordellina or musetta in order to please Galatea; and within this said mountain is found the device to make the tones of the sordellina, which sounds with a keyboard placed under that of the already mentioned harpsichord. The statues are made by worthy men, as are also the other materials, which were used to represent either the sea, the mountain, or the air. This machine takes up the space from the floor to the top of the ceiling; the difficulties of its creation were many, and will be described at the end, so as not to impede the brevity of this account."

Todini's account describes the Metropolitan's gilded instrument (89.4.2929) very accurately, with one important exception: to the right of the harpsichord is a freestanding statue of Galatea. The position of her arms may indicate that she once held a lutelike instrument, now missing. This figure of Galatea may not be original, as it does not jibe with either Todini's account or a similar description in a 1672 payment record to its carver Jacob Reiff. Indeed, the original Galatea may have sat in the shell just to the right of the harpsichord, mirroring her image on the harpsichord's frieze. A small clay model of the present array of harpsichord and statues, discovered in Rome in 1949 by Emanuel Winternitz, was probably made between 1676 and 1825, during which period the new Galatea must have been installed. The other freestanding statue

to the harpsichord's left is Polyphemus, the man-eating Cyclops shepherd whose infatuation with the sea nymph Galatea is described in Book 13 of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and would later be musically depicted in Handel's 1719 masque *Acis and Galatea* (20.192.17). Polyphemus, whom Ovid has playing panpipes in vain to woo Galatea, is here seated on a rock playing a sordellina, a seventeenth-century Italian keyed bagpipe with accordion-like bellows played by gentlemen amateur musicians. Todini's sordellina is depicted with a fourth pipe—a contrabass drone—a recent technical innovation that, in combination with its key system, gave the instrument many of the qualities of a small portable organ. To simulate the sounds of the sordellina, Todini devised a mechanism, first conceived during the plague of 1656, to fit under the harpsichord's keyboard. This device controlled pipes hidden in Polyphemus' rock. Unfortunately, neither the controlling mechanism nor the pipes have survived, and it remains questionable whether pipes could squeeze within the small space provided by Polyphemus' rock (see Pollens 1990). However, recent research reveals that pipes may have been concealed behind three lost seascapes which hung behind the instrument and were painted by the distinguished landscapist Gaspard Dughet (see Barbieri 2002).

Todini's Italian-style harpsichord with double-octave strings is typical except for its unusual length of 9 feet, 10 inches (299.7 cm). It rests in a case covered with a richly carved frieze depicting Galatea processing over the waves in a car drawn by dolphins, surrounded by sea creatures of all kinds, moving away from Polyphemus (89.4.2929). Some of the creatures blow horns, and a figure to the far left plays a lute. The case seems to be carried to the left by three fishtailed Tritons, and two sea nymphs among the Tritons look to the right, as they wade through carved waves on a platform held up by lions' feet. At the right end of the watery platform is a large empty shell carried by two dolphins driven by a putto. Laurence Libin, research curator, has commented that "no more astounding example of Roman Baroque woodwork exists" than this remarkable construct. The Macchina di Polifemo e Galatea, first envisioned in 1657, took almost a decade to complete. The entire machine, including gilding and carvings executed by Basilio Onofri and Jacob Reiff (1627–1700) respectively, was not finished until 1665; the exhibit was not complete until 1672.

The extravagent Galleria Armonica, which Todini had hoped would be a source of significant income, led him instead into financial disaster. Nevertheless it was a popular stop for visitors to Rome. The Galleria was part of the Grand Tour, and many eighteenth-century travel accounts describe it. Perhaps the most famous is Charles Burney's visit cited in *The Present State of Music in France and Italy* (London, 1773, pp. 392–93). After Todini's death, the Galleria was owned for the next 106 years by the Verospi family of Rome, who ran the exhibits quite profitably.

The collection was apparently broken up in 1796, and the Golden Harpsichord passed through several owners until, as part of the Crosby Brown Collection of Musical Instruments, it was donated to the Museum in 1902. None of the other splendors of the Galleria Armonica have survived.

Citation

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Further Reading

Patris, Pascale, and Adriana Rizzo. "An Unfolding Tale: The Making and Transforming of The Golden Harpsichord." *Journal for the American Musical Instrument* Vol. 39 (2013).

Pollens, Stewart. "Michele Todini's Golden Harpsichord." *Metropolitan Museum Journal* 25 (1990), pp. 33–47.

Barbieri, Patrizio. "Michele Todini's Galleria Armonica." *Early Music* 30 (November 2002), pp. 565–

Additional Essays by Wendy Powers

- Powers, Wendy. "The Guitar." (September 2007)
- Powers, Wendy. "The Development of the Recorder." (October 2003)
- Powers, Wendy. "Violin Makers: Nicolò Amati (1596–1684) and Antonio Stradivari (1644–1737)." (October 2003)
- Powers, Wendy. "Musical Terms for the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries." (October 2003)
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